



# COCO FUSCO

*Ana Nuño*

**H**ow is the other pinned down, reduced to a bundle of stereotypical images? How does it work, the trick of strapping another human being onto the straitjacket of a vicarious identity? In other words, what does alienating the other's self feel and look like? These and similar interrogations form the axis around which revolves most of Coco Fusco's work. In the past decade, from *Norte:Sur* (1990) to her more recent *The Incredible Disappearing Woman* (2000), various aspects of the cross-cultural reshaping of individual and community identities have been thoroughly addressed and tackled by this artist through more than a dozen installations, video documentaries and performances. In the process, she has had the talent to add to these by now mainstream concerns her own particular brand of irony and humor.

A Fusco performance and multimedia event is immediately recognizable. There are those recurring themes, of course, but there is also a way of dealing with them in depth, which precludes the preachy tone or the self-serving complaint. Undoubtedly, this is where the humor and irony brand of her approach comes in, and it is maybe due to one of her "cross-cultural" traits: Coco Fusco is an American of Italian and Cuban descent. The Latino accent falls everywhere in her work, even or

▲ *Els Segadors*, video stills, 2001 ►  
courtesy of the artist

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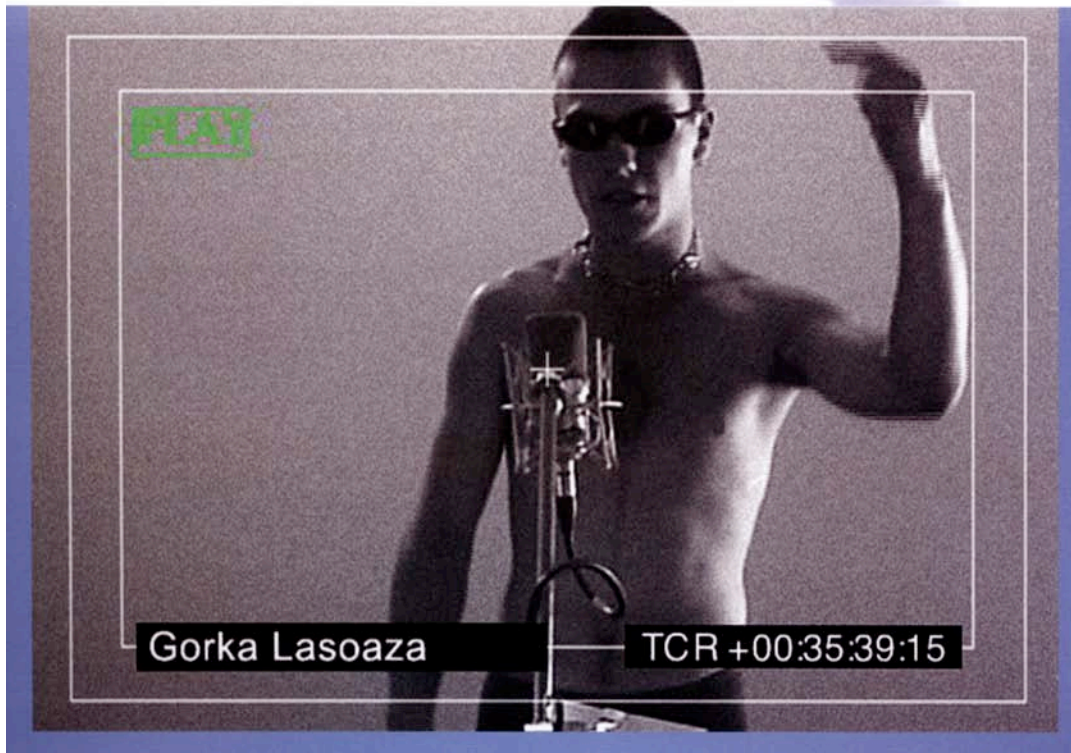
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perhaps especially in those pieces where she lingers on the most dramatic events that have affected the lives of Latinos living in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Latino accent means here a certain way of manifesting concern through a playful, non-aggressive humor. This is, of course, one of those “stereotypical images” Coco Fusco’s work is bent on highlighting and exploding, and the mere fact that one refers to it is a *contrario* proof that her attention to these all-pervading ideological elements carries with it a transcendent meaning and justification. Well aware that identity strategies are, by far, the most complex cultural issue nowadays, Fusco has had the intelligence and sensibility not to simplify the realities they encompass or merely try to convince her audience. It is not as if she had picked on a theme—multiculturalism—or a method—deconstructive parody—and then decided to couch these in politically and artistically correct forms. It is in other, more powerful ways that Fusco’s “machines” work. By her origins and upbringing, and by sheer conviction, Fusco has placed her work, well before her concerns became staple commodities in the art and academic scene, at the very core of her own search for a significant art form. Surely it is a way for this artist to

deploy her work and bring in at the same time her own personal story. Viewed from this angle, her work can also be construed as manifesting a sensitive, reflective and, why not, ideological autobiography.

“History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now,” noted Walter Benjamin in “On the Concept of History,” one of the last essays this Jewish German philosopher wrote before committing suicide, panic-stricken at the thought that the Spanish Guardia Civil could hand him over to the German Nazi police officers. This happened sixty-one years ago in the little town of Port-Bou, the first or the last (depending on one’s point of view) Catalan town along the coastal border with France. When Coco Fusco came to Catalunya in June 1999, invited as visiting artist at La Quam near Barcelona, she understood that one of those burning historical issues that infuses and informs the present was, for Catalans, national identity. It was then that she first struck on the idea of doing video work on this particular subject, focusing on one of its emblems—Catalunya’s national anthem. She could not have guessed or intuited better.

## HOW NOT TO SING AN ANTHEM



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*Els Segadors*, video still, 2001, courtesy of the artist

As it happens, Catalunya's local government, at the hands of the conservative *Convergència i Unió* party since 1980, has had the ability for the past two decades to defuse social unrest and disguise all forms of cultural and economic inequalities beyond recognition by reducing political discourse and action to nationalistic concerns. For the past four decades, Catalunya has emerged as a distinctly bilingual and multicultural society, with a majority (54% of its inhabitants) acknowledging Spanish, and not Catalan, as their mother-tongue.<sup>2</sup> The recent, massive arrival of non-European immigrants to Catalunya has only aggravated what already was a striking contradiction in a *de facto* multicultural society.

What Coco Fusco's work on the symbols of Catalan identity tends to do is stress the glaring disparities between a formal, official version of identity and the reality it is meant to address and reflect. By picking Catalunya's national anthem, "Els Segadors," she hit the mark. One month before she came to Barcelona, invited by the *Museu d'Art Contemporània de Barcelona* (MACBA), and started work on the casting and filming parts of her project, the *Departament d'Educació* of the *Generalitat* adopted a resolution whereby all children attending primary classes and high school in Catalunya would henceforth have to study and learn "Els Segadors," Catalunya's national anthem.<sup>3</sup>

Jordi Pujol, president of the *Generalitat* of Catalunya, has argued that making knowledge of "Els Segadors" compulsory for children at school should be seen as "a method to articulate the identity of the country." Coco Fusco's video documentary on this hymn not so much stresses the disparities between the act of singing it aloud and the way Catalans feel about it, as more significantly the absurdity lying behind any attempt at forcibly "articulating the identity of a country." To begin with, the depositaries of identities are not countries, but individuals and, to a certain extent, enclosed, self-contained communities. More

important, though, is the stress Fusco lays on the tensions that underlie and remain buried beneath the rhetoric of national identity. A Catalan girl of Andalusian descent may sing "Els Segadors" to a Sevillanas rhythm, or an Anglo-Pakistani will declare the music does not appeal to him, and thus proceed to adapt it to his own liking. These "irreverent" responses are, in fact, the only possible way to adapt to an imposed cultural pattern. In the process, "Els Segadors" aptly becomes "other" than it is meant to be by the official guardians of Catalan national identity. In this way, Andalusians and Pakistanis, Nigerians and Dominicans and Cubans, and also Catalans of ancient stock, create a cultural "niche" where they can effectively mediate between a compulsory identity, arbitrarily imposed on them, and their own personal and communal sensibilities.

Up to the present, Coco Fusco's work, centered as it was on cross-cultural phenomena in minority communities in the United States, dealt primarily with the other's suppressed or censored identities. In the video documentary she has created

for the *Unpacking Europe* exhibition, the stress lies more heavily on the ways individuals relate and respond to a homogeneous set of cultural values. Here lies, undoubtedly, the specifically European dimension of this work. American mainstream culture and cultural values are defined negatively. As Fusco herself puts it:<sup>4</sup>

the main philosophical and political trend in the United States has consisted always in defining identity through the body.... This stems from American positivism and its stress on appearance. When I start a new course, I always ask the same question to my students: do they understand the difference between race and ethnics. And invariably they don't. To them, being black is having black skin, but never feeling black, speaking in a certain manner, practicing a particular religion, having distinct gastronomical tastes.

In America, each ethnic minority has to fight to make its reality known, respected and accepted in a context marked by at least ignorance of, at most contempt for, non-mainstream—that is, non-White-Protestant—cultures. In Europe, on the other hand, strategies of identity salience are tantamount to nationalistic homogeneous and exclusive politics. It is the Spanish State throwing out the Jews and Muslims from the peninsula in 1492, the French State banning Breton and Alsatian and Corsican from its educational system, or more recently the Serbs "ethnic cleansing" its territory of Bosnian Muslims and Albanians. The formidable nationalistic identity constructs that have given rise to European states tend to assimilate alien cultures by slowly disintegrating or, in case this fails, by eliminating them.

Coco Fusco's work, faithful to what Benjamin thought of as the historian's task, fills one of Europe's most ancient ghosts—the nightmarish dream of a homogeneous, ideally eternal, unal-

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tered cultural essence—with the invigorating “presence of the now.” At a time when Europe must either accept the “other” cultures that live in its soil, or condemn itself to singing old vengeful patriotic anthems.

**Ana Nuño is a Venezuelan essayist and poet living in Barcelona.**

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> I am well aware that “Latino” is a misnomer for a more complex reality, and that particularly in the United States it carries with it unwanted connotations for a number of Latin American communities. But for brevity’s sake, I would rather not sacrifice here to the idols of political correctness.

<sup>2</sup> Two distinct realities must be distinguished here. On the one hand, until the recent arrival of non-peninsular and non-European immigrants to Catalunya, basically two linguistic communities shared its geographical space: the Catalan- and Spanish-speaking ones. But the latter was formed by poor, illiterate immigrants of peasant stock coming from very different Spanish regions: Andalusia, the Levant, and Extremadura, for the most part, but also from Galicia and the more destitute areas of Castille. These furnished Catalunya’s industries with its main work force, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Thus, it is not a paradox to state that, until the very recent leveling of material conditions and cultural mores that has come into effect in Catalunya, what distinguished this region from others in Spain was its bilingual *and* multicultural frame. On the other hand, nationalists and Catalanists do have a point when they stress the fact that, during Franco’s regime, an avalanche of Spanish-speaking immigrants were encouraged to establish themselves here, thus breaking an ideal balance between the two communities. Nonetheless, as is usually the case, nationalist discourse is also based on the assumption that there existed an originally “pure”—thus ideal—community, unmixed and segregated from foreign influences. It is this historically false and politically pernicious bias that accounts for the extreme blunders and opportunism that dominate public discourse on Catalan national identity to this day.

<sup>3</sup> The resolution also strongly recommends that patriotic or folkloric hymns, such as “El Virolai,” “L’emigrant,” “El cant del poble,” “La sardana de l’avellana,” or “L’estaca,” be included in music courses as optional matter.

*Els Segadors* was officially adopted as Catalunya’s national anthem by its Parliament on February 17, 1993. Its lyrics were written at the end of the nineteenth century, a time when prominent Catalans began reshaping the cultural identity of Catalunya, during the cultural revival movement known as *La Renaixença*. It was first adopted as Catalunya’s national anthem during the short-lived Republican period in the thirties, despite opposition by some of the most notorious Catalan writers and



*Els Segadors*, video still, 2001, courtesy of the artist

intellectuals, like Jacint Verdaguer. As a matter of fact, the original lyrics of the seventeenth century song did not reflect a will to secede from Spain as the present hymn does. They appealed, on the contrary, to the authority of the King of Spain and relied heavily on Christian imagery. The peasant’s war cries were “Visca la fe de Christ!” (Long live faith in Christ!) and “Visca lo rey d’Espanya, nostre senyor!” (Long live the King of Spain, our Lord!). The peasants’ revolt from which it originated, known by historians as the *Guerra dels Segadors*, the Reaper’s War (1640-1652), was a popular revolt sparked by the callous levying policies of Gaspar de Guzmán, count-duke of Olivares, the authoritarian Felipe IV’s minister of state.

<sup>4</sup> Ana Nuño, “De fronteras y cuerpos. Entrevista a Coco Fusco,” *Quimera* 185 (November 1999): 50-57.

*Els Segadors*, video still, 2001, courtesy of the artist

